

Bill Would Safeguard 9.1 Million Acres of Public Land in Utah

Washington, DC - In an effort to preserve 9.1 million acres of Utah's spectacular red rock country as wilderness, Congressman Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) and U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL) today introduced legislation in the House and Senate that would ensure the public land remains in its natural, undeveloped state. Hinchey and Durbin's bipartisan America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, which was introduced with 66 original cosponsors in the House and three in the Senate, would protect the land from commercial development, motorized vehicles, road building, as well as oil and gas drilling. Currently, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) owns the 9.1 million acres, but the agency is not prohibited from selling part of the land for development or developing parts itself.

"America's red rock wilderness is a national treasure that must be preserved in its natural state for future generations to enjoy and cherish," said Hinchey. "Since former Congressman Wayne Owens introduced this bill 22 years ago, support has continued to grow as more and more Americans have learned of the need to protect this region's natural beauty. Conservationists from throughout the country and in Utah support this effort, and I am hopeful that this legislation will one day become law."

"The legislation Congressman Hinchey and I are introducing today will designate as wilderness some of our nation's most remarkable, but currently unprotected public lands," said Durbin. "This land was chosen based on meticulous research and surveying of thousands of square miles to determine which lands should be protected. America's Red Rock Wilderness is a lasting gift to the American public that will give future generations the opportunity to enjoy a landscape that so many now cherish."

The publicly owned wild places of Utah are world-renowned for their spectacular beauty, with deep, narrow red rock canyons, fantastic sandstone arches, tremendous open vistas, and wild rivers. Currently, only 1.1 percent of Utah's BLM public lands are protected as wilderness. Nowhere else in the lower 48 states can such intact wilderness-quality lands be found. These areas are a haven for outdoor recreationists, backpackers, hikers, wildlife enthusiasts, and many more. The red rock area is also rich with archeological remnants of prehistoric cultures.

The original version of the America's Red Rock Wilderness Act was introduced in 1989 by

former Utah Congressman Wayne Owens. After Owens retired he asked Hinchey to introduce the legislation, which the congressman began doing in 1994. Durbin did the same beginning in 1997. The bill is based on an extensive survey conducted by volunteers from the Utah Wilderness Coalition (UWC). This public inventory, called the "UWC Citizen's Proposal," found that the BLM had overlooked or ignored vast areas of wild country in the agency's original inventory. As additional inventory work has been conducted for the Citizen's Proposal, the America's Red Rock Wilderness Act has been updated to reflect the latest findings. The new version of the bill proposes protections for roughly 9.1 million acres of BLM public land in Utah.

The America's Red Rock Wilderness Act would ensure the 9.1 million acres in Utah remain wild in their natural state, and strictly prohibit mining, road and dam construction, off-road vehicle use, and other activities that would destroy the area's special character. Non-consumptive uses such as hunting, fishing, camping, backpacking, hiking, and horseback riding would be permitted and grazing rights existing at the time of any wilderness designation would also be unaffected.

The measure is endorsed by the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance in Utah, and more than 240 local and national conservation groups with the Utah Wilderness Coalition.